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Biomechanical comparison of different external fixation configurations for posttraumatic pelvic ring instability

Tiziani, Simon ; Osterhoff, Georg ; Ferguson, Stephen J ; Spreiter, Gregor ; Scheyerer, Max J ; Spinas, Gian-Leza ; Wanner, Guido A ; Simmen, Hans-Peter ; Werner, Clément M L

Abstract: Background. External fixation is useful in the primary treatment of pelvic ring injuries. The present study compared the biomechanical stability of five different configurations of an external pelvic ring fixation system. Methods. Five configurations of an anterior external pelvic ring fixation system were tested using a universal testing machine. One single connecting rod was used in group “SINGLE,” two parallel connecting rods in group “DOUBLE,” two and four rods, respectively, in a tent-like configuration in groups “SINGLE TENT” and “DOUBLE TENT,” and a rhomboid-like configuration in group “RHOMBOID.” Each specimen was subjected to a total of 2000 consecutive cyclic loadings at 1 Hz lateral compression/distraction (± 50 N) and torque (± 0.5 Nm) loading alternating every 200 cycles. Translational and rotational stiffness were determined at 100, 300, 500, 700, and 900 cycles. Results. The “SINGLE TENT” and “RHOMBOID” configurations already failed with a preloading of 50 N compression force. The “DOUBLE” configuration had around twice the translational stability compared with the “SINGLE” and “DOUBLE TENT” configurations. Rotational stiffness observed for the “DOUBLE” and “DOUBLE TENT” configurations was about 50% higher compared to the SINGLE configuration. Conclusion. Using two parallel connecting rods provides the highest translational and rotational stability.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1155/2014/360165>

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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-88793>

Journal Article

Accepted Version

Originally published at:

Tiziani, Simon; Osterhoff, Georg; Ferguson, Stephen J; Spreiter, Gregor; Scheyerer, Max J; Spinas, Gian-Leza; Wanner, Guido A; Simmen, Hans-Peter; Werner, Clément M L (2014). Biomechanical comparison of different external fixation configurations for posttraumatic pelvic ring instability. *Advances in Orthopedic Surgery*, 2014:360165.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1155/2014/360165>

Biomechanical comparison of different external fixation configurations for posttraumatic pelvic ring instability

Simon Tiziani¹, Georg Osterhoff, MD¹, Stephen J. Ferguson², Prof., Gregor
Spreiter², Max J. Scheyerer, MD¹, Gian-Leza Spinas¹, Guido A. Wanner, Prof.,
MD¹, Hans-Peter Simmen, Prof., MD¹, Clément M. L. Werner, Prof., MD¹

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¹ Department of Surgery, Division of Trauma Surgery, University of Zurich,
Raemistrasse 100, 8091 Zurich, Switzerland

2 ² Institute for Biomechanics, ETH Zurich, HCI-E355.2 Wolfgang-Pauli-Strasse 10, 8093,
3 Zurich, Switzerland

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8 **Corresponding author:**

9 Simon Tiziani

10 Department of Surgery
11 Division of Trauma Surgery,
12 University Hospital Zurich,
13 Raemistrasse 100
14 8091 Zürich,
15 Switzerland
16 Tel: +41 44 255 1111
17 Fax: +41 44 255 4406

1 Email: simon.tiziani@uzh.ch

2 **Abstract**

3 *Background* External fixation is useful in the primary treatment of pelvic ring injuries.

4 The present study compared the biomechanical stability of five different configurations
5 of an external pelvic ring fixation system.

6 *Methods* Five configurations of the same anterior external pelvic ring fixation system
7 were tested on pairs of polyoxymethylene testing cylinders using a universal testing
8 machine with $n = 3$ for each sample group. One single connecting rod was used in group
9 “SINGLE”, two parallel connecting rods in group “DOUBLE”, two and four rods,
10 respectively, in a tent-like configuration in groups “SINGLE TENT” and “DOUBLE
11 TENT” and four rods in a rhomboid-like configuration in group “RHOMBOID”. Each
12 specimen was subjected to a total of 2000 consecutive cyclic loadings at 1 Hz with
13 sinusoidal lateral compression/distraction (± 50 N) and torque (± 0.5 Nm) loading
14 alternating every 200 cycles. Translational and rotational stiffness were determined at
15 100, 300, 500, 700 and 900 cycles.

16 *Results* The “SINGLE TENT” and “RHOMBOID” configurations already failed with a
17 preloading of 50 N compression force. The “DOUBLE” configuration had around twice
18 the translational stability at 100, 300, 500, 700 and 900 cycles when compared with the
19 SINGLE ($p=.002, .003, .005, .000$, and $.000$) and “DOUBLE TENT”
20 ($p=.001, .001, .001, .000$, and $.000$) configurations. Rotational stiffness observed for the
21 “DOUBLE” and “DOUBLE TENT” configurations was about 50 % higher when
22 compared with the SINGLE configuration at 100 ($p=.024/.012$), 300 ($p=.019/.074$), 500
23 ($p=.031/.011$), 700 ($p=.003/.005$) and 900 cycles ($p=.004/.006$).

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1 *Conclusion* Using two parallel connecting rods for external pelvic ring fixation provides
2 the highest translational (lateral compression/distraction) and rotational (bending of the
3 hip) stability.

4

5 **Level of Evidence:** Basic Science Study

6 **Keywords:** pelvic fracture, pelvic ring injury, external fixation, external fixator
7 configuration

8

1 **Background**

2 Although unstable pelvic ring injuries are relatively rare(1), patients suffering from such
3 injuries often show extensive haemorrhage(2). Blood loss can occur from osseous
4 structures at the fracture site, venous bleeding from the sacral plexus or arterial
5 bleeding(3). Pelvic volume increases with pelvic ring disruption, which further hinders
6 haemostasis. The primary objective in such situations is to re-establish pelvic ring
7 integrity and stability, reducing pelvic volume in the process(3, 4). **Together with pelvic**
8 **packing and clamping, external pelvic fixation has become an established adjunct**
9 **for stabilizing** unstable fractures and increasing chances of haemostasis(5-10). External
10 fixation may assist haemostasis in different ways, reducing fracture surfaces, ensuring
11 blood clot stability, stopping venous bleeding and achieving some tamponade by
12 reducing pelvic volume(11, 12). Though it has been shown that it may not induce
13 pressure-induced tamponade(6). There are numerous different external fixator constructs
14 with each making different configurations possible. Furthermore there are different
15 locations for pin anchoring in the pelvis. A supraacetabular placement of the external
16 fixator pins has shown to be superior in stability compared to pins placed in the iliac
17 crest(13, 14). Continuing stability of the external fixation is crucial in ensuring optimal
18 chance for haemostasis. Patients rarely present with isolated injuries to the pelvis.
19 Patients with concomitant abdominal injuries are frequent, making e.g. further abdominal
20 surgery necessary(15). This and the fact that some patients are obese, has made it
21 necessary to come up with different configurations of the external fixation construct to fit
22 the respective situations. The following configurations, tested in this study, were in use at
23 our University hospital when treating unstable pelvic ring fractures. The “SINGLE”

1 (Figure 1A) and “DOUBLE” (Figure 1B) configurations represent standard
2 configurations. The “SINGLE TENT” (Figure 1C) and “DOUBLE TENT” (Figure 1D)
3 configurations are used where the distance from the symphysis to the skin is increased in
4 obese patients, making the application of the “SINGLE and “DOUBLE” configurations
5 impossible. Finally the “RHOMBOID” (Figure 1E) configuration is installed when
6 further abdominal procedures (e.g. laparotomy) are to be expected.
7 The aim of the study was to compare the stability of five different configurations of the
8 same external pelvic fixation construct. **The hypothesis was that there would be no**
9 **difference in stability between the different configurations.**

1 **Materials and Methods**

2 *Samples*

3 The testing protocol included the testing of five different configurations of the same
4 external fixation construct for the pelvis (Hoffmann II, Stryker, Kalamazoo, MI, USA).
5 The groups to be tested included the following configurations: “SINGLE” (Figure 1A),
6 “DOUBLE” (Figure 1B), “SINGLE TENT” (Figure 1C), “DOUBLE TENT” (Figure 1D)
7 and “RHOMBOID” (Figure 1E). The fixator’s pins (diameter 5mm) were inserted into
8 polyoxymethylene cylinders (diameter 70mm) (Delrin, DuPont, Wilmington, DE, USA),
9 one for each pin. Distance between the two polyoxymethylene cylinders and angle of pin
10 insertion were measured at an external fixation device mounted in the supraacetabular
11 region of a synthetic model of the pelvis (Pelvis, Synbone, Malans, Switzerland) (Figure
12 1F). The pins were than screwed into the polyoxymethylene cylinders at a 45 degree
13 angle and 7cm from the later inward facing edge, making the distance from pin
14 entry to pin entry site 21 cm. The couplings interfacing the pins and the rods were
15 always placed with their upper edge on the first mark on the pins. In the “TENT”
16 and “DOUBLE-TENT” configuration the distance between the pin-rod interface
17 and the rod-rod interface was 24 cm (in the “DOUBLE-TENT configuration this
18 refers to the outer tent), resulting in a distance from rod-rod coupling to the surface
19 of the cylinders of 25 cm in the plumb line. The distance from rod-pin interface to
20 the rod-rod interface in the “RHOMBOID” configuration was 26 cm on all sides.
21 The shapes of the different configurations were determined by an experienced
22 orthopedic trauma surgeon (C.W). The five different configurations were attached to

1 the pins via the rod-pin interface couplings, which all were tightened by the same person
2 (S.T)

3

4 *Biomechanical testing*

5 For the tests two different loading scenarios were selected. Firstly a translational loading
6 scenario was applied, where the construct was loaded simulating compression and
7 distraction in the pelvis. Secondly a rotational loading scenario was applied that would
8 simulate e.g. hip bending. These two scenarios were chosen because they address the
9 most common situations occurring in the post-op phase: patients in supine position, leg
10 movement and patient transfer.

11 Thus all samples were tested using a universal testing machine (ElectroPulse E10000,
12 Instron, Norwood, MA, USA) (Figure 2) according to the following protocol: alternating
13 cycles of compression and distraction (along the cylindrical axis) and rotational loading
14 (rotation around the cylindrical axis). Each sequence consisting of 200 cycles at 1 Hz was
15 run 5 times, making a total of 2000 cycles (1000 cycles each) per sample.

16 After slowly loading and observing a displacement of >25mm with +/- 50N translational
17 load, 50N was chosen for loading the cycles in translational loading. Rotational torque
18 was set at +/- 5 Nm.

19 Measurements during testing were recorded by a +/-1000 N (compression/distraction
20 forces) and a 25 Nm (torque forces) loading cell and the computer programme calculated
21 translational and rotational stiffness. Failure, as defined in the testing protocol, leading to
22 abort of testing included: Displacement overshooting the machine's range of motion (+/-
23 30mm translation and +/- 135 degrees rotation) and/or interface or construct failure.

1

2

3

4 Evaluation:

5 *Translational stiffness [N/mm]*: Translational stiffness readings were taken at 100, 300,
6 500, 700 and 900 cycles to be analysed statistically. This is a measure for resisting
7 displacement when loaded simulating lateral compression and distraction.

8 *Rotational stiffness [Nm/degree]*: Rotational stiffness readings were taken at 100, 300,
9 500, 700 and 900 cycles to be analysed statistically. This is a measure for resisting torque
10 forces on the pelvis.

11

12 *Statistical analysis*

13 After preliminary testing, a sample size calculation was performed using PS Power and
14 Sample Size Calculations 3.0 (alpha error: 0.05)(16).

15 With an expected difference in means of 0.5 N/mm and a standard deviation of
16 0.15N/mm for translational stiffness and an expected difference in means of 0.08
17 Nm/degree and a standard deviation of 0.025 Nm/degree for rotational stiffness the
18 calculated number of samples to be able to reject the null hypothesis that the population
19 means of the experimental and control groups are equal with a probability (power) of 0.8
20 was 3 per group.

1 Comparison of translational and rotational stiffness was done using a One-Way-ANOVA
2 with a post-hoc Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons using SPSS for
3 Windows V20.0 (SPSS, Chicago, Illinois, USA). Differences were considered
4 significant for values of $p < 0.05$.

5

6 *Source of Funding*

7 There was no external funding source for this investigation.

8

9 **Results**

10 The “SINGLE TENT” and the “RHOMBOID” configurations showed more than 30mm
11 displacement before reaching 50N lateral compression-distraction loading, resulting in
12 failure as defined by the testing protocol.

13

14 *Translational stiffness (Figure 3):*

15 The “DOUBLE” configuration was 59%-71% stiffer than the SINGLE configuration at
16 100, 300, 500, 700 and 900 cycles ($p = .002, .003, .005, .001$, and $.001$). Comparing it to
17 the “DOUBLE TENT” configuration, the “DOUBLE” configuration was between 86%
18 and 95% stiffer ($p = .001, .001, .001, .001$, and $.001$). There was no significant difference
19 in translational stiffness between the “DOUBLE TENT” and the “SINGLE” configuration

20 *Rotational stiffness (Figure 4):*

21 The “DOUBLE” configuration exceeded the “SINGLE” configuration in stiffness by 35%
22 to 60% at 100, 300, 500, 700 and 900 cycles ($p = .025, .019, .031, .003$, and $.004$). The
23 “DOUBLE TENT” configuration was stiffer than the SINGLE configuration at 100 cycles

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1 (41%, $p = .012$), 500 cycles (43%, $p = .011$), 700 cycles (57%, $p = .005$) and 900 cycles
2 (55%, $p = .006$); there was no significant difference at 300 cycles. Also, there was no
3 significant difference between the “DOUBLE” and the “DOUBLE TENT” configurations.

4

5 No permanent deformation was observed in any of the tested implants. No interface
6 failure occurred.

7

1 Discussion

2 The aim of the study was to compare different configurations of the same external pelvic
3 fixation construct, testing them for translational and rotational stiffness. The “SINGLE”
4 configuration showed two-third of the “DOUBLE” configuration’s stiffness and the
5 “DOUBLE” configuration was twice as stiff as the “DOUBLE TENT”
6 configuration. There was no significant difference between the “DOUBLE” and the
7 “DOUBLE TENT” configurations regarding rotational stiffness. Between the “DOUBLE
8 TENT” and “SINGLE” configuration there was a significant difference in rotational
9 stiffness, the “DOUBLE TENT” was twice as stiff. Both the “RHOMBOID” and the
10 “SINGLE TENT” configurations failed.

11 In the beginning there were efforts to devise external fixator constructs that would by
12 themselves stabilize vertically unstable pelvic fractures. This was demonstrated not to be
13 possible(17, 18). As soon as this was realized, complexity in external fixation construct
14 decreased, seeing as multiple pins increase the chance for pin-track infections(19).
15 Research has since focused on finding the optimal pin placement site(13, 20) or
16 determining difference in stability between different fixator constructs and
17 configurations(21-24). It was not clear how our fixation construct’s stability would
18 change when the configuration was adapted for obese patients or patients undergoing
19 abdominal surgery.

20 There are a few limitations innate to the testing protocol. Failure within our test setup
21 does not have to result in failure in the clinical setup. The testing setup was devised
22 solely to analyse construct stiffness, ignoring additional factors like intact ligaments, soft
23 tissue or pelvic contents that might contribute to overall stability. The upside of focusing

on the construct is that we isolate the effect of different configurations on stiffness. The influence of pin anchoring strength in the bone as a possible confounding factor was avoided in this experimental setup, as all tests were conducted with the same pins anchored in the same polyoxymethylene cylinders. Rod-configuration by itself should not have an impact on pin anchoring strength. **One limitation might be that the pin-rod interfaces were not tightened by use of a torque spanner, but the same person (S.T), applying maximal force. However we are confident that this did not influence the results as no interface failure occurred and difference in stiffness was due to elastic deformation within the rods and pins rather than interface loosening.** It is possible that a bulkier configuration would be prone to screw **loosening**, being more difficult to handle in post-op care. An additional limitation is that forces on the pelvis in real patients are not limited to those addressed in this study. It is possible that the construct and its configurations react differently to a combination of translational and rotational forces or a completely different force vector.

There might be other configurations with better biomechanical properties than those tested in our study. Based on the data of the five tested, however, it seems that where the rod was in parallel alignment with the applied force (for the compression/distraction part), the stiffness was greatest. Moreover where an additional rod could be applied, a significant increase in translational stiffness was recorded. Therefore, when the circumstances (patient size, concomitant injuries,...) allow it, one should always choose a configuration where the rod is aligned parallel to the expected force vector. If possible the configuration should be augmented with an extra rod, set up the same way as the first one. The study has shown that the “DOUBLE TENT” configuration is significantly less

1 stiff than the “DOUBLE” one. It is not possible to tell from this study whether a “TENT”
2 configuration provides sufficient stability **in** obese patients in the clinical environment as
3 obesity is also associated with higher loads. An alternative might be a subcutaneous
4 internal anterior fixator, with which the distance from pin entry sites to the connecting
5 rods can be decreased (25, 26). This method would also be an option where further
6 abdominal surgeries are expected avoiding a potentially unstable “RHOMBOID”
7 configuration. There is some evidence that such a device would be at least as stable as an
8 external fixator(27).

9 Any future studies should look at failure of different constructs in the clinical setup and
10 try to come up with quantifiable, maybe in-vivo, results.

12 **Conclusion**

13 Using two parallel connecting rods for external pelvic ring fixation provides the highest
14 translational (lateral compression/distraction) and rotational (bending of the hip) stability.

16 **Competing interests**

17 None.

1 **References**

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1 **Figure legends**

2

3 **Figure 1 Configurations & pelvic instrumentation:** (A) The “SINGLE” configuration.
4 (B) The “DOUBLE” configuration. (C) The “SINGLE-TENT” configuration. (D) The
5 “DOUBLE-TENT” configuration. (E) The “RHOMBOID” configuration. (F) A
6 “DOUBLE” configuration mounted on a synthetic Synbone pelvis.

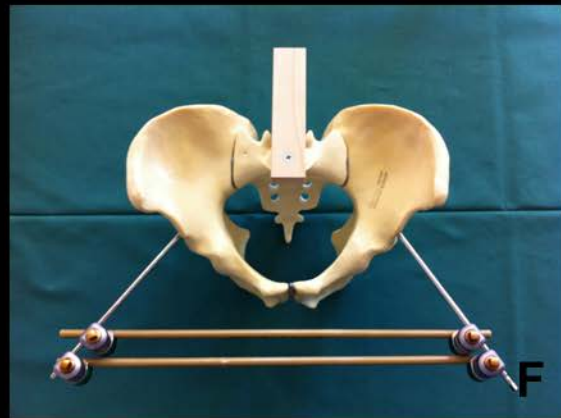
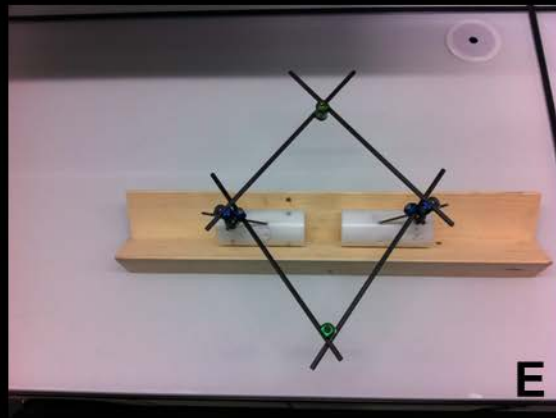
7 **Figure 2 Experimental setup:** Two polyoxymethylene cylinders instrumented with a
8 Hoffmann II external fixator in the “DOUBLE-TENT” configuration mounted on the
9 Intron testing machine. Testing included compression/distraction and rotational loading.

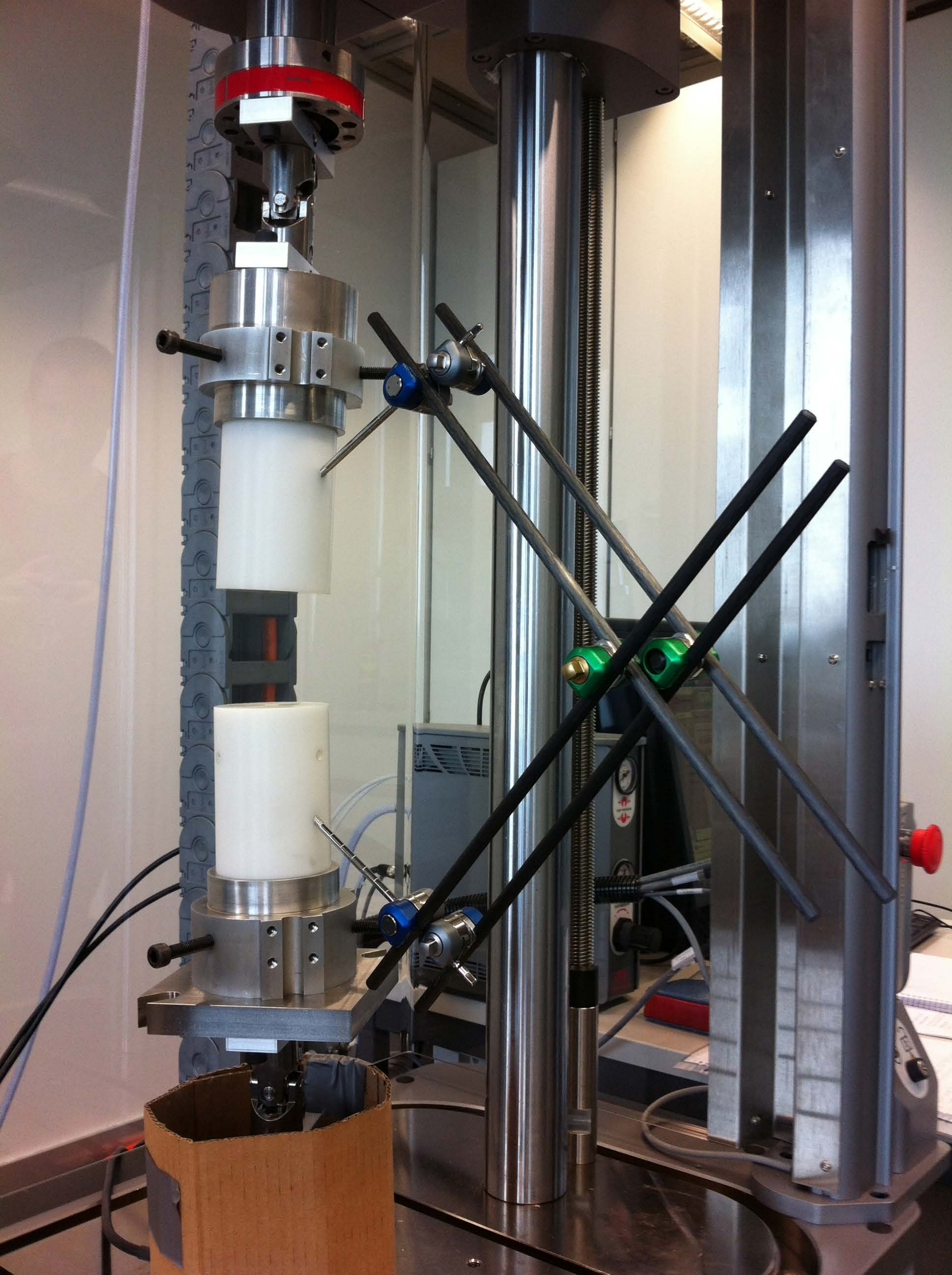
10 **Figure 3 Translational stiffness:** Results for translational stiffness of the five different
11 configurations at 100, 300, 500, 700, 900 cycles. The “SINGLE-TENT” and the
12 “RHOMBOID” configuration failed and thus yielded no results.

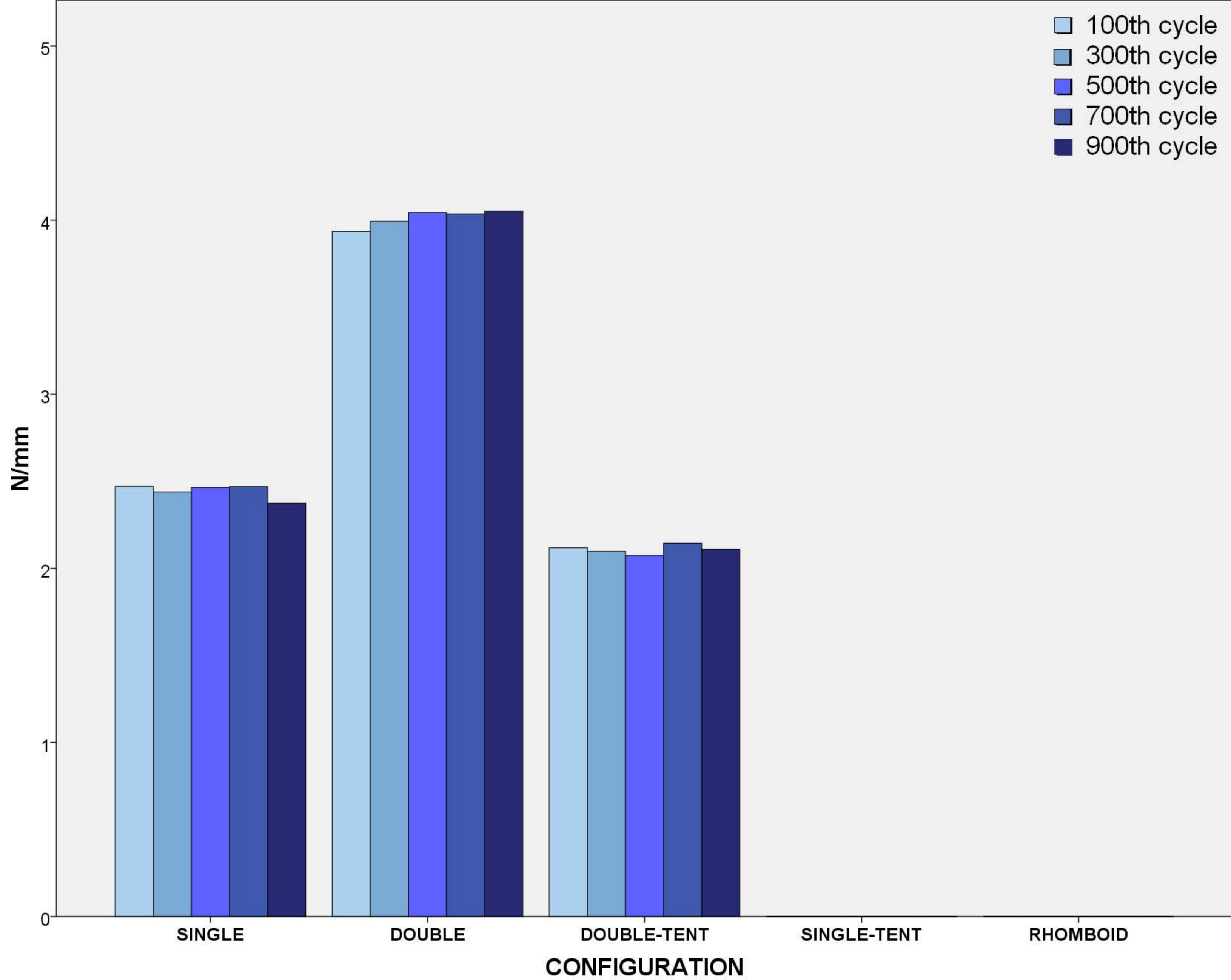
13 **Figure 4 Rotational stiffness:** Results for rotational stiffness of the five different
14 configurations at 100, 300, 500, 700, 900 cycles. The “SINGLE-TENT” and the
15 “RHOMBOID” configuration failed and thus yielded no results.

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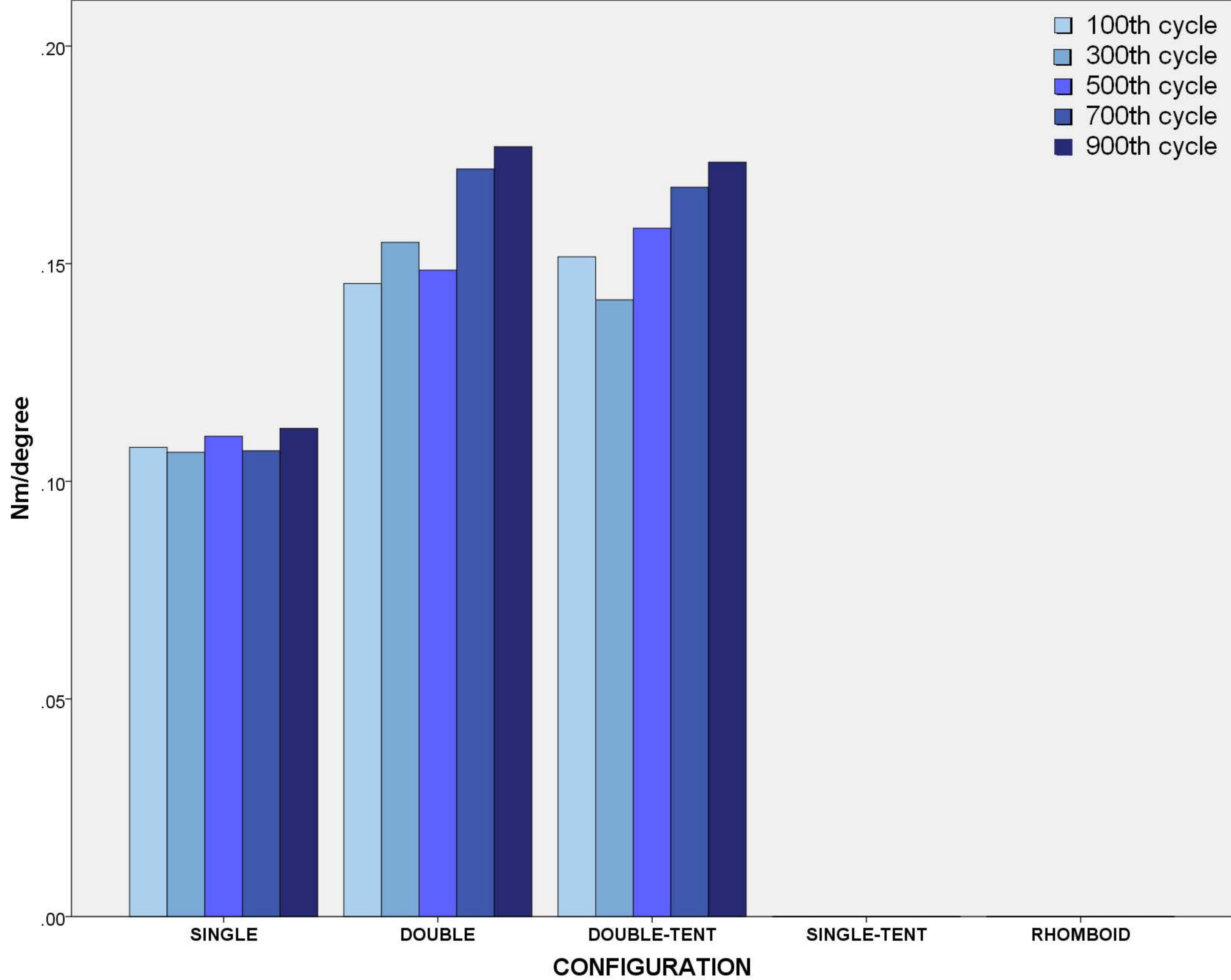


Figure legends

Figure 1 Configurations & pelvic instrumentation: (A) The “SINGLE” configuration. (B) The “DOUBLE” configuration. (C) The “SINGLE-TENT” configuration. (D) The “DOUBLE-TENT” configuration. (E) The “RHOMBOID” configuration. (F) A “DOUBLE” configuration mounted on a synthetic Synbone pelvis.

Figure 2 Experimental setup: Two polyoxymethylene cylinders instrumented with a Hoffmann II external fixator in the “DOUBLE-TENT” configuration mounted on the Intron testing machine. Testing included compression/distraction and rotational loading.

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